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Author(s): Cathy Lynn Preston

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“Cinderella” as a Dirty Joke: Gender, Multivocality, and the Polysemic Text

CATHY LYNN PRESTON

TEXT 1

We all know the story about Cinderella, right? How her fairy godmother zapped a pumpkin and turned it into a coach and then zapped Cinderella's rags and turned them into a beautiful gown. Well, just as Cinderella was getting into the coach, she felt her period come on, and so she turned to her godmother and said, "Damn! I've got another problem."

And the fairy godmother asked, "What's that?"

So Cinderella said, "My period just started, and I don't have a tampon with me."

The fairy godmother said, "No problem, dear," and she turned around, picked up another good-sized pumpkin (here the teller indicated that the pumpkin was of extraordinary size with her hands), and zapped it. The pumpkin turned into a tampon, and she handed the tampon to Cinderella.

Cinderella said, "Thank you," got up into the coach, inserted the tampon, and left for the ball. Well, she got to the ball, met the Prince, and the two of them were having a great time when, all of a sudden, she heard—"Bong, Bong, Bong"—the palace clock starting to chime midnight. And she sort of buckled over a little bit, saying something like, "Oh! Oh! I gotta go!" But the Prince had hold of her hand, and he wouldn't let her go—"Bong! Bong! Bong! Oh! Oh!" She pulled and she pulled, trying to get away, but the Prince just held on tight. Finally, she said, sort of frantic-like, "I really have to leave!"

And the Prince said, "But I don't even know your name."

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And Cinderella, still trying to pull away, turned and gasped, "It's Cinderella! What's yours?"

And the Prince said, "Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater."

Cinderella heaved a great sigh of relief and said, "Thank God!"
(collected from a female undergraduate
at the University of Colorado,
Boulder, Fall, 1991)

Witty, irreverent, and blatantly sexual, this version of a Cinderella joke (which is also an oral-sex joke) both extends and deconstructs the Disney Cinderella textual tradition, a bourgeois air-brushed fantasy which became, after its release by the Disney studios in 1949, the version of Cinderella to dominate America. But although the joke's framing device ("We all know the story of Cinderella") may initially evoke what Jane Yolen in 1977 (rpt. 1982) referred to as Disney's "spun-sugar character"—a representation which invites everyone to taste of her moral sweetness—, the young woman in the joke is no passive day-dreamer. She is a woman firmly tied to reality by means of her material body.

Deconstruction of the Disney representation begins in the joke with the onset of Cinderella's menstruation and is continued by means of her fairy godmother's providing her with a pumpkin-turned-tampon and by the prince's (Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater's) implied sexual heroics, cunnilingus. For both male and female performers of the joke, the use of bawdry provides a social commentary on the fairy tale itself either by disclosing its latent sexual discourse or by imposing a sexual discourse on the fairy tale (see Bettelheim 1976 and Dundes 1982).¹ In turn, that sexual discourse encodes concerns about women's biological, sexual, and social reality, about mother-daughter relationships, about cultural representations of what it means to be a man, and about the socio-sexual relations between men and women. In short, as I will argue, the joke is a folk commentary on dominant culture's representation of gender, class, and sexuality. In this article, I will explore the "multiple interpretive possibilities" (Mills 1990:5) of this joke and its textual variants and the ways in which the multivocal folk commentary enables cultural renewal.

1. For a discussion of this joke as a riddle-joke circulating in the early- to mid-1980's Q. "How did Cinderella die?" A. "Her tampon turned back into a pumpkin at midnight." see Jones 1985.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Mikhail Bakhtin has argued that the material body (which he calls the grotesque body) in folk discourse, "is a body in the act of becoming" (1984:317). It is a body of "convexities and orifices" which in the process of penetrating and "swallowing up," constantly ignores and transgresses upon the "smooth" and "impenetrable surface that closes and limits the [classical] body as a separate and completed phenomenon" (1984:318). The material body is constantly involved in a cyclic processing of itself (eating, drinking, belching, farting, defecating, urinating, sweating, menstruating, and procreating), and therefore its existence has no closure. It is most frequently represented by means of its lower stratum (belly, bowels, anus, penis, vulva, womb) and that stratum's disruptive, explosive, and transgressive possibilities. Bakhtin associates this body with carnival (feast days of sanctioned excess), the carnivalesque (the world turned upside down), and the marketplace (a liminal space in which people of different cultural registers intermingle). The relationship between the material body and the classical body is analogous to that between unofficial culture—uninstitutionalized and heteroglossic: a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices—and official culture—institutionalized and canonized: a state that blurs heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981 and 1984).

Although the relationship between the material body and the classical body need not necessarily be class-inflected, it has, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have argued, increasingly tended to be so in Western Civilization since the 16th century because the bourgeois subject "continuously defined and redefined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as low—as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating . . . [the] very fact of exclusion was constitutive of its identity" (1986:191). In this way, Western cultures began to transcode bodily and social topography, establishing (as Laura Kipnis, summarizing Stallybrass and White, has noted) a politicized "homology between the lower bodily stratum and the lower social classes" (1992:376):

in mapping social topography against bodily topography, it becomes apparent how the unsettling effects of grossness and erupting bodies condense all the unsettling effects (to those in power) of a class hierarchy tenuously held in place through symbolic (and less symbolic) policing of the threats posed by bodies, by lower classes, by angry mobs. [1992:377]

Kipnis applies Stallybrass and White's class-inflected model of Bakhtin's discussion of the material body and the classical body to popular men's magazines, in particular *Hustler* (whose below-the-belt body is "often a gaseous fluid-emitting, *embarrassing* body, one continually defying the strictures of bourgeois manners and mores and instead governed by its lower intestinal tract—a body threatening to erupt at any moment") and *Playboy* (an above-the-belt "airbrushed top-heavy fantasy body"), arguing that "the discourse of *Hustler* is quite specifically *constructed against*—not only the classical body, a bourgeois hold-over of the aristocracy, but against all the paraphernalia of petit-bourgeoisiehood as well" (1991:375–378). What is of particular relevance for my analysis of Disney's *Cinderella* and the Cinderella joke (which is clearly constructed against Disney's bourgeois fantasy) is that, as the title of her article—"(*Male*) Desire and (*Female*) Disgust: Reading *Hustler*"—suggests, Kipnis adds gender to Stallybrass and White's analysis of class.

Working one's way from Bakhtin to Stallybrass and White to Kipnis, one cannot help noticing that, as cultural heteroglossia becomes increasingly of interest to academics (Bakhtin's "the people" are differentiated by Stallybrass and White according to socio-economic relations, which are then differentiated by Kipnis according to gender), the category of folk culture disappears from their discourse. Although Bakhtin frequently speaks of "folk" culture (granted, perhaps in a naive and idealized way),² Stallybrass and White consciously erase folk culture and folkloristics in their desire to "move beyond Bakhtin's troublesome *folkloric* approach to a political anthropology of *binary extremism* in class society" (1986:26),³ and for Kipnis folk culture seems

2. In *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin does at times seem to be working conceptually from a 19th-century representation of "the folk" as the undifferentiated masses, "the people," although his discussion of the marketplace as being heteroglossic and his intensive discussion of heteroglossia in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) would seem to belie this representation. Given this potential confusion, allow me to clarify my use of the term "folk culture" to include a recognition that there is no single folk culture, no "homogeneous folk society" (Nicolaisen 1980:139), but instead folk groups (see Dundes 1980:1–19) composed of individuals, each of whom has a slightly different cultural register—the matrix of groups (class, gender, race, religion, etc.) participated in by any single individual which compose that individual's sense of personal identity (Nicolaisen 1980).

3. Although, as Terry Eagleton has noted, there is an awkwardness about Bakhtin's focus on carnival because, as Eagleton explains, "Carnival . . . is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off," (as quoted in Stallybrass and White 1986:13); if one recognizes that the impromptu telling of jokes is not licensed by dominant social structures in the same way that a festival may be, then perhaps one is closer to the epistemology Bakhtin seeks to disclose than one is by erasing the folkloric as a "troublesome approach." For further discussion of the problematics surrounding the term "folk," see Abrams 1993 and Porter 1993.

simply to be nonexistent as an epistemological category. Hence, although Kipnis’s cogent discussion of *Hustler*’s representation of the body and sexuality discloses different sexualities and explains how those sexualities and the political discourse which grows out of them are ideologically inflected by class and gender, that discussion ultimately is incapable of seeing any creative capacity in *Hustler*’s discourse. For Kipnis, *Hustler*’s discourse is solely one of dismemberment:

Hustler is against government, against authority, against the bourgeoisie, diffident on male power—but its anti-liberalism, anti-feminism, anti-communism, and anti-progressivism leave little space for envisioning any alternative kind of political organization. [1992:388–389].

What is missing here is a recognition of a popular medium’s appropriation of folk discourse, particularly the carnivalesque quality of consciously transgressive folk humor, a humor which Bakhtin argues is always ambivalent: “it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (1984:11–12). Carnavalesque laughter’s ability to bury and revive is related to its emphasis on the grotesque:

The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. Negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better. The very material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque image (food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body) bears a deeply positive character. This principle is victorious, for the final result is always abundance, increase. [Bakhtin 1984:62]

Transgressive folk humor, then, does not necessarily seek to construct political organization; to ask it to do so is to misunderstand its nature. Instead, it functions as an ongoing multivocal criticism of all structures which would control its disruptive nature. In disclosing the artificiality of dominant culture’s structures, folk humor offers other ways of seeing, of experiencing, of knowing, a process which is regenerative in its open-endedness. By “open-endedness” I refer to Bakhtin’s image of “a body in the act of becoming,” both in terms of the material body represented in folk discourse and in terms of the texts and their performances (there is no standard text, no hegemonic meaning).

Consciously transgressive folk humor functions as creative contestability. In Disney's version of *Cinderella*, Cinderella's rags are transformed into a ball gown, thereby mapping bourgeois hegemony over that bodily and social (class and gender) topography marked as low and dirty. Disney's refined, orifice-less, non-fluid-emitting, air-brushed fantasy is a prophylactic against all that is repressed or erased by bourgeois ideology. But the Cinderella joke discloses the fragility of the ideologically constructed ball gown by foregrounding not just Cinderella's rags, but specifically her menstrual rags that are normally hidden from view. In doing so, the disruptive creative capacity of the material body is released. If princesses or princesses-to-be bleed, then anything is possible. High meets low, and in this liminal space, culture is momentarily recreated, through, as Kathleen Ashley has noted, "utopian but not deterministic transformations" and what Dominick LaCapra has called "experimental fantasy" (Ashley 1990:xviii; LaCapra 1983; on liminality, see Turner 1969, rpt. 1977; and on symbolic inversion, see Babcock 1978).

THE JOKE AND ITS MULTIPLE INTERPRETIVE POSSIBILITIES

The joke was first told to me by a female undergraduate (19 years old, Anglo, and middle-class) following a class that I had been teaching on the socio-sexual politics of bawdy song (Preston 1992). Among other things that happened in that class, the students split over the use of feminist theory to disclose how the songs mapped a discourse of gender dominance. The young woman, who told me the joke after class, introduced the joke as a "somewhat gross joke that [her] boyfriend [had told] her." When she finished telling the joke, we both laughed and went our separate ways. Because the woman had been a strong advocate of feminist readings of the bawdy songs, I interpreted her performance of the joke as her means of commenting on the class discussion, of espousing her feminism, and as a way of bonding with another woman. But although I think this a relatively valid interpretation of her performance, her introductory remarks left me with the feeling that her performance was double-voiced.

The young woman's performance suggests two points that I will develop throughout this essay: 1) Although transgressive humor does not seek to construct political organization, it does open doors upon otherwise closed surfaces, if only momentarily. To mention or allude to menstruation publicly is to open a door onto female sexuality,

which bourgeois ideology has said should remain closed; it is as if one were lifting the skirts of Cinderella's ball gown to see what, if anything, lay beneath them. This, we have been taught in a myriad of subtle and not-too-subtle ways, is socially gross behavior. My informant's commentary on the joke is double-voiced: one voice would open the door by lifting the skirt, while the other voice would keep the door closed and the skirt firmly in place; one voice speaks female agency, while the other voice condemns the speaking of that agency.

2) Performances and the texts performed are dialogic. Embedded in each performance is an earlier performance. Not only did my informant call the joke gross, but she also attributed it to her boyfriend. Why? Did she mention him out of a felt need for credibility and a personal association of credibility with the masculine voice, or was this her way of transferring her transgressive act to him? (This is not really my joke; it's my boyfriend's.) Either would seem to call into question the assertion of personal agency that might be associated with her telling of the joke. Or perhaps her comment was a commentary on his performance: its purpose, its outcome, his attitudes toward her, himself, and their relationship, etc. If so, then her comment might be seen as being akin to an attribution of authorship, in which case his performance becomes an authoritative text which her performance de-centers. His voice will be embedded latently in the text of her performance, and thus the two performances and the two voices directing those performances function as a dialogue. When I perform the Cinderella joke, my performance embeds my informant's performance in which is embedded her boyfriend's performance (not to mention that all three performances invoke voices from other genres, here for example, a folk tale constructed within the bourgeois discourse of popular culture and a standardized nursery rhyme). Each voice is inflected according to its individual cultural register (as defined by gender, class, race, etc.) and communicative register (a sense of genre as well as folk and popular articulation), hence the heteroglossic nature of the performance and the audience's differing responses to the performance (on dialogism and heteroglossia, see Bakhtin 1981:262–263; on differing responses to a joke, see also Stahl 1989:31–32).

Since hearing the joke for the first time, I have noticed that although some people laugh heartily at the joke, not everyone does. Silence following the joke clearly indicates that the joke-teller has overstepped the boundaries of his or her audience's sense of appropriate decorum. And for those who laugh, both men and women, the

laughter has frequently been fraught with ambivalence. Even among those individuals who have in the past shown a propensity for telling bawdy jokes, there has sometimes been a visual tension, an uncomfortableness. And yet I know from later conversations, in particular with many of the women, that after hearing the joke, they immediately told it to a number of their acquaintances.

Ambivalent laughter following the joke is, I would suggest, directly related to the joke's textual and performance ambiguities. The joke itself is quite complicated. It is meta-textual, both participating in and commenting back on the dominant American Cinderella textual tradition and the "Peter, Peter" nursery rhyme. Cinderella is still a character for whom her godmother seems to do everything and the prince is still, or potentially so, the hero; but this Cinderella bleeds, the godmother's seemingly good magic is potentially destructive, the prince's castle may be a pumpkin shell, and the old social order, having been dismembered, is recreated but in an open-ended way: The joke concludes with a kiss (the traditional symbol of romantic closure, implying "and they lived happily ever after"), but this kiss, positing as it does a meeting of above-the-belt and below-the-belt lips (and the orifices those lips open upon), is transgressive and establishes a liminal site which argues against closure.

That Cinderella bleeds, specifically menstrual blood, ties her character to her material sexual body which will be contorted by the pumpkin-turned-tampon-turned-pumpkin, a symbol of her growing sexual desire, of a possible means of satisfying that desire (the pumpkin-turned-tampon might be read as penis), and of the ramifications of that desire if satisfied coitally, a pregnancy. The trick to the joke is the "if coital," for by the end of the joke coitus is displaced by cunnilingus. Thus where the major portion of the joke would link female sexuality with biological function (procreation), the joke's turn links female sexuality with a form of erotic pleasure which has nothing to do with functional procreation.

The image of Cinderella as an expanding pumpkin foregrounds the primordial female body, a vegetation goddess about to give birth to all of creation, and is thus a powerful symbol in transgressive humor because it foregrounds an image of creativity generally erased by bourgeois aesthetics. Although a potentially positive and powerful representation of femaleness for women, it is so ambiguously, and thus is a source of ambivalent reactions to the joke on the part of women: 1) because pregnancy has frequently curtailed female mobil-

ity, literally and figuratively, 2) because, as Marta Weigle has explained, patriarchal culture has tended to relegate procreation “to elemental or physical or biological status, while spiritual or metaphysical or symbolic creation becomes the valued paradigm for ritual, custom, art, narrative, and belief systems” (1989:xi), and 3) because (in the process of envisioning the female body as a mechanical, if biological, incubator) female sexuality was denied the ability to experience erotic pleasure. As Angus McLaren has written,

... until the seventeenth century there existed in England a common culture of procreational knowledge in which women’s sexual pleasure was seen both by laymen and doctors as necessary for fecundity. In the seventeenth century this common culture was undermined. What one finds is that a new ‘high’ culture of scientific embryology emerged that severed the traditional linking of pleasure and procreation: what had been the common culture became the ‘low’ culture. As indicated by the reprintings of traditional works such as *Aristotle’s Masterpiece*, the older interpretations did not disappear, but they were increasingly viewed by the educated and respectable as aspects of the mind of the lewd and vulgar. [1984:21–22]

By mid-19th-century, medical books, such as Dr. William Acton’s *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, were proclaiming that

there can be no doubt that sexual feeling in the female is in the majority of cases in abeyance . . . and even if raised (which in many instances it never can be) is very moderate compared with that of the male. . . . As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions. [1857, as quoted in McLaren 1984:27]

In this way was formed the bourgeois image of the respectable female as being asexual. Active and aggressive female sexuality was associated with working-class women and was mapped accordingly in terms of the transcoding of bodily and social topography (McLaren 1984:28). The female bourgeois subject defined her sexuality (procreation, motherhood, domesticity) against that mapped as low and dirty. Thus it is little wonder that from the 1960’s forward, the feminist movement has been grounded in attempts to reclaim the female body and female sexual pleasure from a bourgeois ideology that would erase both from view. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard

Tennenhouse argue that representations of the body and of “sexual relations can uphold specific forms of political authority” and that “the terms and dynamics of sexual desire [is] a political language in modern cultures” (1987:2). When, in the Cinderella joke, coitus is displaced by cunnilingus, literal and metaphorical pain and limitation associated with procreation are displaced by the writhing laughter of the fecund female body giving birth to female pleasure and female agency. That laughter is, if only momentarily, the political language of utopian possibilities.

Although women generally experience both parts of the joke (sometimes wincing or physically contorting their bodies at the significance of the pumpkin-turned-tampon and laughing or not laughing at the implied cunnilingus), their commentaries suggest that what they respond to and the intensity of their responses to it may differ from one woman to another. For example, while one young woman (age 20) noted, “The joke is and isn’t funny. I mean, if that pumpkin keeps on growing, it could tear her apart” (Spring, 1992), another woman (age 40–50) indicated that by the end of the joke she had forgotten that Cinderella was menstruating (Fall, 1992). Here, it would seem that while one woman focused more on the potential problems associated with female sexuality, the other woman focused more on its potential pleasures.

For a young woman who has never had sexual intercourse, the joke may delineate her fears of both the male’s erect penis (“it could tear her apart”) and pregnancy (“it could tear her apart”). Furthermore, the physical violence of that ripping may map a violence done to her social self inasmuch as the godmother’s traditional injunction to be home by midnight has been understood as marking a cultural taboo against pre-marital sex (Kolbensschlag 1988:74). For a woman who has had sexual intercourse and perhaps been pregnant before, the joke may have less to do with fears concerning the erect penis or pregnancy than with a recognition and rejection of the cultural ambiguities that surround female sexual pleasure (a cultural mapping of the “good” woman’s body as functional as opposed to the “bad” woman’s body as erotically driven). And for yet another woman, the joke, when told by a woman to a woman, may map an homoerotic moment; the penis is replaced by a mouth, and mouths can be female as easily as they can be male. Certainly the process of a woman sharing the joke with another woman establishes a female homosocial bond, at least as

long as the other woman is not affronted by the performance. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued,

. . . it seems at this [particular historical] moment to make an obvious kind of sense to say that women in our society who love women, women who teach, study, nurture, suckle, write about, march for, vote for, give jobs to, or otherwise promote the interests of other women, are pursuing congruent and closely related activities. Thus the adjective “homosocial” as applied to women’s bonds . . . need not be pointedly dichotomized as against “homosexual”; it can intelligibly denominate the entire continuum. [1985:2–3]

Finally, for any woman who has been caught without a ready tampon, the beginning of the joke may map an awkward situation: without that tampon our material bodies (those which are supposed to be nonexistent) stain our ball gowns, thus making themselves visible. Just as our bodies may be said to laugh at our attempts to control and thereby erase them, so, when we tell the joke, we laugh at cultural attempts to control and thereby erase us.

Two voices of such potential control are the godmother’s and the prince’s. The godmother, the good mother, traditionally represented as an helpful agent, is so here; and yet the beneficial attribute of her magic is drawn into question. She is a woman sharing information about women’s bodies with a younger woman, providing the younger woman with the means of dealing with the biological functions of a woman’s body. And that is good. She provides Cinderella with the means of getting to the ball and thus getting to the prince. And that seems good. But she may also be seen as a symbol of dominant culture whose duty it is to enculturate the younger woman within heterosexuality (she provides the penis) and within bourgeois attitudes towards sexuality (the primacy of coitus, injunctions against pre-marital sex, and, in the act of turning rags to ball gown, a representation of the good woman as essentially asexual). And that is not so good, given the joke’s counter-hegemonic discourse. In this way, the representation of the fairy godmother maps an ambiguous discourse concerning bourgeois representations of a good mother.

And the prince, a representation of socio-economically privileged male authority, the fetishized object of every Cinderella’s dreams, is here posited as being a hero only if he performs cunnilingus. This is a man whose traditional representation, if allowed a

sexual component, would aesthetically enjoy reading *Playboy* magazine, not *Hustler*. And yet, in the joke, he turns out to be a pumpkin-eater. Thus the turn of the joke foregrounds a sexuality which is distinctly counter-hegemonic of bourgeois sexual aesthetics and of bourgeois prescriptive representations of maleness. As Gershan Legman has noted, in traditional male bawdry for a man to perform oral sex on a woman is emasculating and “cunnilinctus during menstruation is thought of as the absolute *n*th degree of perversion, in its masochistic submission to the woman” (1968:575). Certainly one of my male informants (a late-forties Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering) found the joke quite unfunny. His reaction was a contorted facial expression and the comment, “That’s gross!” When asked what was gross, he replied, “oral sex, and on a woman who’s menstruating” (Summer, 1992).

Still, some men did laugh. And so I wonder, does the joke for males map a contestive site within homosociality in terms of representations of male gender? Although it is possible that people (male or female) laugh sometimes simply at someone other than themselves being put in an awkward situation, I don’t think this completely explains the laughter here. There is a shift in register for the hero from fairy-tale prince (read socio-economically privileged male) to a regular guy who sometimes finds it economically difficult to put a roof over his and his wife’s head. In the “Peter Peter” rhyme,

Peter, Peter, Pumpkin eater,
Had a wife and couldn’t keep her.
Put her in a pumpkin shell,
And there he kept her very well,

a reading of the word “keep” as “take care of” or “provide for” suggests Peter Peter’s socio-economic distance from the prince. A folk parody of that rhyme supports such a reading:

Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater
Had a wife and couldn’t keep her.
Peter sadly shook his head:
“Damned inflation,” Peter said.

[Hickerson and Dundes 1962:255]

If class-identity is a point of contention in the Cinderella joke, then Peter Peter’s implied ascendancy over the Perault-Disney representa-

tion of a prince may be a source of humor for those men and women who broadly identify with Peter Peter's socio-economic register and/or with Peter Peter's sexuality.

Certainly a number of the women whom I asked to comment on this joke suggested that Peter Peter *was* a prince specifically because he knew how to do something that the Disney prince did not know how to do or would not do. As Regina Barreca has noted concerning women's sexual humor, the number of cunnilingus jokes that circulate among women—"What's a sixty-eight? That's where you go down on him and he owes you one"—suggests that "a lot of women are interested in foreclosing on . . . outstanding debts" (1991:161). In addition to specifically gendered interests, that the class-identity of Peter Peter was of importance for some women was revealed during a conversation I had with an acquaintance (Anglo, 30–40 years old), who works as a secretary/program coordinator (staff as opposed to faculty) at the university and whose husband works in construction. We had been discussing some of the male and female faculty with whom she works and by whom she frequently feels erased when I asked her about her reaction to the joke which I had told a mutual friend who had told it to her. When asked about male and female reactions to the joke, she responded by suggesting that if I wanted to know what "real men" thought, I should go to The Bustop, a local bar known to be frequented by working-class men (interview, Spring, 1992). The elision of her comments about the faculty and her pointing me towards a working-class bar suggested an assertion of class-based agency through a representation of male academics as "prissy and uptight" and their wives, or perhaps female academics, as sexually unsatisfied. One might note here a *Hustler* cartoon, the caption for which read, "Eat your pussy? You forget Gladys, I have a Ph. D." (Kipnis 1992:378). It also suggests a representation of her own register as participating in a sexuality intent on mutual gratification through a foregrounding of female pleasure: "Not only do real men eat quiche—real men eat anything" (Barreca 1991:164). Thus, I would suggest that among some women the class-identity and a sexuality associated specifically with that identity is at least in part what made the joke appealing.

Frequently, though, women tended to focus on the representation of female gender and problems respective to women's socio-sexual reality as both a source of humor in the joke and a possible reason for their ambiguous responses to the joke. Key to this ambiguity, I

believe, was a latent association of gender-dominance with the figure of Peter Peter. When the word “keep” in the traditional “Peter, Peter” rhyme is understood as indicating “ownership” rather than “provide for,” then a slightly different reading of the joke’s turn may be evoked. This interpretation would entail reading the “Peter Peter” rhyme as really being about women as property, about patriarchal prescriptions of female chastity, and about the means by which chastity is maintained (the confinement within walls, those of the Prince’s castle or of Peter Peter’s pumpkin shell, those of bourgeois socio-sexual aesthetics, those of male gender-dominance, and those of her own body). Female informants, when asked to comment on the “Peter Peter” rhyme relatively consistently said things like “It’s about a man who couldn’t keep his wife home” or “It’s about a man controlling ‘his’ woman” (Fall, 1992). Thus, from the point of view of some women, although Peter may release Cinderella from one set of problems—cunnilingus satisfies her sexually and without the threat of pregnancy—, Peter Peter may yet prove to be just as socially confining as the more traditional prince. This possibility is lent some credence by another parody of the “Peter Peter” rhyme collected from a male undergraduate at the University of Colorado, Boulder:

Peter Peter, Pumpkin eater,
Had a wife and loved to beat her,
Fucked her ass so very nice
She tongued his balls not once but twice.

[collected Fall, 1992]

Thus “Peter Peter” is heteroglossic and may evoke different responses to the joke from different people.

This version of a “Peter Peter” parody is in and of itself worth a brief analysis because, although it is ideologically antithetical to the Cinderella joke, the parody functions analogous to the joke. Like the joke, the parody may be understood as using the grotesque to overturn the social norm. Inversion of the normative social order is suggested by a reading of “beat” as an antonym of “keep” as well as by the dismemberment of traditionally sanctioned representations of gender roles and sexuality (the husband-provider and coitus) which are displaced by representations of culturally taboo erotic pleasures (somasochism, pedication, and fellatio). Or the parody may be understood as using the grotesque to disclose the hegemonic hypo-

crisy (if “beat” is read as a metonym for “keep”) of bourgeois self-representation.

Both the parody of “Peter Peter” and the Cinderella joke enable a re-envisioning and thereby assertion of agency on the part of particular individuals and groups (in terms of this parody and this joke, probably not the same individuals and groups). And those individual assertions of identity might well be inflected by specific ideological agendas. But, in the liminal space created by the rending of bourgeois hegemony, a realm of possibility, a creative potentiality which has no closure, is also made available to everyone normally “dominated, displaced, or silenced by the textuality of [dominant culture’s] texts” (Edward Said 1983:53). The latter is achieved when transgressive humor discloses sacred or secular scripts as fragile human constructions.

VARIANT TEXTS

That a joke can mean different things to different people is further suggested by three other versions of this joke. Text 2, from a collection of jokes entitled *Gross Jokes* published by Julius Alvin in 1983, seems to be told from a male point of view:

TEXT 2

Cinderella was very happy for a while after marrying the handsome prince, but eventually she became bored. She started fooling around, and soon she was screwing everything in pants. Her fairy godmother warned her several times, to no avail. Finally, she became so upset that with a wave of her wand she turned Cinderella’s cunt into a pumpkin.

Two weeks later, the fairy godmother checked in. She was amazed to see Cinderella looking happier than ever. “What happened?” the fairy godmother asked.

“I’ve just met Peter Peter,” Cinderella replied.

[Alvin 1983:158]

Although I could be wrong about the male point of view, it has been my experience that men are more likely than are women to refer to female genitalia and women generically as “cunts.” Women may sometimes use the term “cunt” to denigrate other women by linguistically mapping them as lower bodies, but they do so at the cost of erasing a part of themselves, a risk not taken by men when they use the term. Hence, most women I have spoken with generally avoid

using the term unless they are self-consciously using it as a political act of linguistic reclamation (see Suleiman 1986:101) or, in a related way, as an agreed upon form of endearment among close female friends. Thus, although it is not impossible that this version of the joke was performed by a woman, if performed by a woman, it would require a slightly different explication than I intend to present here.

If told by a man, the joke would seem to map a discourse which may assert gender dominance, although ambiguously so, while foregrounding class-struggle. Gender dominance is suggested in two ways: 1) through objectification of female genitalia as "cunt" and as grotesque pumpkin and 2) through the erasure of female agency (insomuch as a male voice inflected on the text might foreground Peter's character and male agency, thereby marginalizing Cinderella). Because the slang term "cunt" is frequently used not only to denote a specific part of female anatomy but as a synecdoche for woman (as in "She, Cinderella, is just another cunt," the alternative equivalent of which would be "He, Peter" or "He, the prince, is just another dick"), the teller's use of the term seems to be an attempt to reposition Cinderella according to gender rather than socio-economic register. The shift in representation is from a position of socio-economic dominance (princess) to gendered subordination (woman). Concurrent with this shift from high to low is the foregrounding of female genitalia and female sexual desire as being by nature all-consuming, in other words, the essence of female reality. The image of the godmother's (the godmother is in this joke clearly a protector of patriarchal interests and authority) punishing Cinderella for adultery by turning her genitalia into a pumpkin maps a discourse in which female genitalia and female sexual desire are ideologically marked as being grotesque.

Not only has the privileged female been repositioned through the use of the grotesque, but that repositioning then enables Peter Peter, and those males who identify with him, to maintain gender dominance while destabilizing the hegemony of socio-economically privileged males. Because, in this version of the joke, Peter Peter and the prince are two different characters, the joke foregrounds one man's ability to cuckold another man, thus highlighting a contestive site within homosociality. The relationship in the joke is between the two men (the prince and Peter Peter); the woman is merely the vehicle or site in which contestive homosociality is enacted (Sedgwick 1985). That the prince has been unable to dominate and control that site,

whereas Peter Peter can and does, maps Peter Peter’s sexual heroics as a recuperative act of a patriarchy grown slack. However, his means of recuperation, of cuckolding the prince, possibly highlights a male voice in the text which is Peter Peter’s, but a different Peter Peter than I have been describing thus far.

Cuckoldry has most frequently been feared by men and chastised by society because of concern about establishing paternity; therefore, cuckoldry must most frequently entail coitus. And yet in this joke cunnilingus, not coitus, is the means of cuckoldry. Not only does this overturn and displace a 19th-century representation of proper female sexuality as being solely biologically functional with an image of a female sexuality that is pleasure-seeking, but it erases the function of that which fetishistically has traditionally been the dominant cultural symbol of sexuality and of masculinity. If Peter Peter is a superman, it is not because, as his name implies, he has an extra-large penis (linguistically enlarged through repetition), but because he satisfies Cinderella sexually by assuming what, for some men, may be perceived as a subordinate sexual position, but which for others is merely one of many possible positions, all equally playful. Seen in this way, Peter Peter’s sexual heroics do not so much map a discourse of male gender dominance as they do a recuperative act of an image of maleness culturally erased by traditional representations of masculinity which highlight the prince’s socio-economically privileged position and a sexuality which fetishizes the penis.

That different voices are present in the joke, evoking different responses from different people, was confirmed for me by informants’ comments on this version of the joke: women fairly consistently did not like this version, most frequently citing as a reason for their dislike the use of the term “cunt” to refer to female genitalia; men tended to prefer this version of the joke to other versions, generally citing as their reason that it was shorter and more to the point, but in some cases noting that Peter Peter takes “the girl away from the prince” or that Peter Peter “gets to be the hero” (Spring and Fall, 1992). One young man (the same who provided me with the misogynistic parody of Peter Peter), who preferred this version to the oral text, referred to Cinderella as a slut, a reaction, I assume, to Cinderella’s adultery and to a female voicing of agency latent (if told by a male) in the text. Clearly, transgressive jokes and their performances are polysemic, and different people hear and react to different voices in the texts.

If a male voice inflected on the joke maps Peter Peter's assertion of sexual and thereby social agency (however that agency is individually understood), texts 3 and 4 of this joke suggest the ways in which a female voice inflected on the text, particularly a text meant to be shared by a woman with other women, may foreground women's dialogues about female sexual bodies and a woman's right to sexual gratification, thereby functioning as a means for women to assert socio-sexual agency. Text 3, printed in a collection of jokes entitled *More Jokes for Women Only* published by Susan Savannah in 1991, is quite similar to Julius Alvin's text (discussed above). Textual differences lie primarily in a shift in diction: "Screwing everything in pants" becomes "sleeping with everybody" and "cunt" becomes "private parts." Hyperbole ("two weeks later"), used by the male voice to intensify the assertion of male sexual heroics, is semi-normalized ("three days later") by the female voice:

TEXT 3

Cinderella was very happy for a while after marrying the handsome Prince, but eventually, she became bored. She started fooling around, and soon she was sleeping with everybody. Her Fairy Godmother warned her several times, but it did no good. Finally she became so upset with Cinderella that with a wave of her wand she turned Cinderella's private parts into a pumpkin. Three days later, the Fairy Godmother checked in to see how she was getting along. She was amazed to see Cinderella looking happier than ever. "What's going on?" the Fairy Godmother asked.

"I've just met Peter Peter!" Cinderella beamed.

[Savanna 1991:88]

Text 4 of the joke, collected from a young woman who had heard it told in 1990 among a group of women who were having dinner together in the Brigham Young University cafeteria, seems to be a conflation of the oral and printed texts:

TEXT 4

Cinderella was getting ready to go to the ball when she realized she had started her period.

"No problem," said the fairy godmother as she turned a pumpkin into a tampon. As Cinderella left for the ball, the fairy godmother warned, "Remember everything will turn back to normal at midnight."

Well, Cinderella didn't come home at midnight. In fact, she didn't come home for three days. Her fairy godmother was very worried, and when Cinderella returned, she immediately asked, "Where were you?"

“Oh fairy godmother,” Cinderella replied, “I met the most wonderful man. His name is Peter Peter!”

[collected in Boulder, CO, Fall, 1992]

Both versions of the joke told by women are contestive of bourgeois representations of the proper woman as asexual or of attempts to confine her within a rigidly narrow sexuality. Text 3 additionally confronts dominant culture’s attempts (here represented by the godmother’s attempts) to inflect female sexuality, ideologically, with moral grotesqueness. In text 3, female agency is asserted by Cinderella’s willingness to flaunt dominant culture’s prescriptions against adultery: the prince can’t satisfy her, so she finds someone who can. Agency is hers, not the prince’s, not the godmother’s, and not Peter Peter’s. Cinderella asserts her right to escape the prince’s castle’s walls, as well as the good bourgeois mother’s attempts to inscribe her within those walls, and she does so without necessarily being confined within Peter Peter’s pumpkin shell. Text 4 asserts female agency through Cinderella’s disregard of the godmother’s injunction against premarital sex and the implied reward she receives for doing so, a man who apparently can deal aesthetically with a woman’s material body and who, consequently, is capable of satisfying her sexually. Interestingly, although in this version of the joke Disney’s prince is not even mentioned and is thus utterly erased, this version is, of the four, the most sentimentally romantic: “I met the most wonderful man!” Cinderella still quests for and finds her prince, but the cultural construction of what it means to be a princess or a prince has changed. Although both female performances enable a gendered bonding among women, there are hints of difference between the female voices directing the individual texts: age and experience may be hinted at in the post-marriage and pre-marriage situations, and text 4 is inscribed, at least loosely, by the religious context of Brigham Young University which serves as a frame for its earlier performance.

OF GODMOTHERS AND GODDAUGHTERS

Common to all four texts of the Cinderella joke is a foregrounding of the female material body and that body’s needs, needs which through a cross-coding of bodily and social topographies map a folk discourse that is intensely contestive of bourgeois representations of gender, class, and sexuality. Transgressive humor enables a momentary rending of hegemonic bodily and social topography. In that

moment, all that has been mapped by dominant culture as low, dirty, repulsive, noisy, and contaminating is given free reign to test other possibilities playfully. This process will be inflected differently for people of different cultural registers in part because the jokes themselves and the individual performances of the jokes are heteroglossic. Thus different people (whether performers or audiences) may respond to different voices in the texts: voices of earlier performances, voices of other textual traditions, voices of people identified differently by cultural register, voices of competing ideologies, etc.

Still, one should note that the cyclic deaths and rebirths, envisioned through this "body in the act of becoming," do not take place outside of time and space. In particular, the four versions of the Cinderella joke appearing in this article have been transmitted among a people who are currently redefining the ideological bases of their fairy tales. And with this in mind, I will conclude with a joke which was hotly circulating in Boulder, Colorado, during the two months preceding the 1992 Presidential election. The joke was told to my husband and me at dinner one evening by a woman, age 73, who is the godmother of our two daughters. Thus, although this joke is a different joke than the one I have been discussing up until now, contextualized within the family setting, it has something to do with godmothers and god-daughters. And within our family context, the joke even has something to do with princesses and princes in so much as we have jokingly referred to our daughters as Boulder princesses (and not always to invoke a set of positive connotations). More broadly, though, the joke maps a changing ideological environment. Transgressive humor is invoked to create a liminal space (through the meeting of lips and the upper-body and lower-body orifices that those lips open upon) in which culture can be recreated. In the joke, a metaphorical princess-to-be speaks and the hegemonic patriarchy of old princes is shattered:

You know how Hillary Clinton has been giving political speeches everywhere? Well, she was getting ready to give another speech, and in preparation for it, she shaved off all of her pubic hair. The next day she was on the platform in front of a big crowd of people, and she gave her speech, at the end of which she raised her skirt and said, "Read my lips; NO MORE BUSH!"⁴

[Boulder, Colorado, 1992]

4. The joke's punchline playfully refers to "Read my lips; no more taxes," perhaps the most remembered line from former President George Bush's acceptance speech at the 1988 Republican National Convention.

Here, the grotesque body—and, by means of a transcoding of bodily and social topography, those people who have (because of their gender, class, race, sexual orientation, ideological affiliation, etc.) felt themselves dominated and erased by the policies of a hierarchy held tenuously in place—erupts. For many women, the joke itself and the process of performing the joke mapped an assertion of specifically female agency. Female orifices (mouths and vulvas) went public—a gendered, communal, bodily orgasm voiced. But in the process of dismembering and thereby destabilizing the established gendered order, the transgressive laughter that ensued opened a space in which a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices might be heard. Not only did a godmother tell the joke to the parents of her goddaughters in Boulder, Colorado, and the mother of the girls spend the next week gleefully telling the joke to all of her female acquaintances, but a husband told it to his wife in Boston, Massachusetts, and in Jacksonville, Florida, at a political rally instigated by the appearance of then Vice Presidential candidate Al Gore, two African-American men asked an Anglo man (who was carrying a homemade sign sporting the joke’s punchline) if he had heard the joke, to which he happily responded in the affirmative.

I should note that not everyone laughed at this joke. Almost everyone, but not everyone. Furthermore, although the joke and its multiple performances posit a happy cacophony of lips meeting lips (those of the mouth and the vulva, those of women, those of women and men, those of men, those of different classes and different races) which momentarily enables polyphonic, utopian assertions of agency, at the end of the election-process, it was not Hillary Clinton who was elected president; it was her husband, a socio-economically privileged, Anglo male. Bill (William) Clinton may have begun life as a deprived, small-town Arkansas boy from a dysfunctional family, but, by the time of the election (having once upon a time received the transformative touches of Georgetown, Oxford, and Yale Universities), he was a prince, married to a princess, and governing a substantial if impoverished principality. This is the Horatio Alger myth near and dear to hegemonic bourgeois American culture, the form of symbolic inversion that made Disney’s “Cinderella” so appealing to a post-war, post-depression 1948 (and 1992?) America. Whatever differences the Hillary Clinton joke latently mapped between former President Bush and President Clinton, whatever fantasy was permitted by the visual pun of Bush’s reluctant upper lips elided with Hillary’s exalting lower

lips, as in "Kiss my Vulva!", when the carnivalesque rhetoric subsided, the normative social order was re-established in terms of normative bourgeois representation. What remained to be seen was how Hillary would deal with Bill's newly acquired pumpkin shell and how Bill as the chosen prince would continue to satisfy a constituency that, to varying degrees, had identified with Hillary.

University of Colorado at Boulder
Boulder, Colorado

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